

**Bolivar or Escobar:**  
**The Nature of Colombian Guerrillas**

**A Monograph**  
**by**  
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Though the US is physically located in the Western Hemisphere, for most of its history, policy toward the South American countries that share this region has taken a distant second to Euro-centric issues. One of the few areas of concern that has consistently energized contemporary debate about relations with these Southern neighbors is the "war on drugs." In Colombia, the narcotics trafficking problem has become increasingly complex as drug trade has merged with a fifty-year-old insurgency that appears to be gaining strength. Colombia's position in the national discourse has been raised recently with the request by the government of Colombia for \$1.3 billion in financial and materiel aid to support its Plan Colombia, a \$7.5 billion counter-narcotic, counter-insurgency offensive. Recent US policy toward Colombia has been dominated by concerns about narco-trafficking. Although the government of Colombia is dealing with an extremely complex security threat, the US government has chosen to restrict its assistance to only those activities that are both directly contributing to the counter-narcotic effort and distinct from any counter-insurgent efforts. There are oft-stated fears of becoming mired in a Vietnam-style conflict. Unfortunately, the difficulty of distinguishing between counter-narcotic and counter-insurgent operations cannot be overestimated in the present Colombian environment. Many pundits and even some government officials attempt to simplify the equation by claiming the dominant insurgent group, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia--FARC) is no longer a group of revolutionaries driven by ideology and a desire to supplant the existing government, but have instead devolved into a criminal drug organization with an insurgent propagandistic façade. If this conclusion were accurate, it could potentially simplify implementation of US policy and reduce the strings attached to aid for the Colombian government. If, however, this conclusion is flawed (or at least a dangerous oversimplification) the consequences for future US involvement could be grave. In the interest of obeying Sun Tzu's admonition to "know your enemy," it seems prudent to answer the question, "Is the FARC still an insurgency?" The analysis of this specific inquiry is structured in five sections. The first section describes the importance of the research question. For the issue to be relevant, it must first be established that the US has an interest in what happens to Colombia. Is Colombia a part of the US national security sphere? Once the significance of Colombia has been proven, the next step is to explain why the nature of the FARC has a bearing on US policy in the region. Section two lays the necessary foundation, which includes the turbulent political history of Colombia that gave rise to insurgent movements, as well as contemporary circumstances that shape the current situation. In light of the changing nature of the insurgent groups and the US policy distinctions between counter-narcotic and counter-insurgent activities, section three explores the nature of insurgency. What are the necessary and sufficient criteria for classifying a group as insurgent, vice criminal or terrorist? With a clearer understanding of exactly what is required for an insurgency, the FARC is examined to answer the basic research question. How do its actions and ideology match up with relevant criteria? Implications for the debate on US involvement in Colombia are presented in section five. Colombia is facing an extremely complex problem and related US policy concerns are no simpler. While this paper addresses a very important question, it is also limited in scope. It does not attempt to rule on the merit of the ideologies involved. It makes no attempt to fix blame for the current situation. It does not address the manifold problems of human rights and the Colombian military's involvement with right-wing paramilitaries. It does not propose a solution to the drug problem or even presume to suggest appropriate US policy. Its purpose is strictly to inform the debate by examining the character one of the "enemies" involved in the struggle. In the final accounting, the FARC is conducting revolutionary insurgent warfare. Policy makers would do well to remember this when formulating US posture and actions toward the government of Colombia.

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Colombia; narco-trafficking; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia--FARC); insurgent warfare

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## Abstract

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Though the US is physically located in the Western Hemisphere, for most of its history, policy toward the South American countries that share this region has taken a distant second to Euro-centric issues. One of the few areas of concern that has consistently energized contemporary debate about relations with these Southern neighbors is the “war on drugs.” In Colombia, the narcotics trafficking problem has become increasingly complex as drug trade has merged with a fifty-year-old insurgency that appears to be gaining strength.

Colombia’s position in the national discourse has been raised recently with the request by the government of Colombia for \$1.3 billion in financial and materiel aid to support its Plan Colombia, a \$7.5 billion counter-narcotic, counter-insurgency offensive. Recent US policy toward Colombia has been dominated by concerns about narco-trafficking. Although the government of Colombia is dealing with an extremely complex security threat, the US government has chosen to restrict its assistance to only those activities that are both directly contributing to the counter-narcotic effort and distinct from any counter-insurgent efforts. There are oft-stated fears of becoming mired in a Vietnam-style conflict. Unfortunately, the difficulty of distinguishing between counter-narcotic and counter-insurgent operations cannot be overestimated in the present Colombian environment.

Many pundits and even some government officials attempt to simplify the equation by claiming the dominant insurgent group—Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia--FARC) is no longer a group of revolutionaries driven by ideology and a desire to supplant the existing government, but have instead devolved into a criminal drug organization with an insurgent propagandistic façade. If this conclusion were accurate, it could potentially simplify implementation of US policy and reduce the strings attached to aid for the Colombian government. If, however, this conclusion is flawed (or at least a dangerous oversimplification) the consequences for future US involvement could be grave. In the interest of obeying Sun Tzu’s admonition to “know your enemy,” it seems prudent to answer the question, “Is the FARC still an insurgency?”

The analysis of this specific inquiry is structured in five sections. The first section describes the importance of the research question. For the issue to be relevant, it must first be established that the US has an interest in what happens to Colombia. Is Colombia a part of the US national security sphere? Once the significance of Colombia has been proven, the next step is to explain why the nature of the FARC has a bearing on US policy in the region. Section two lays the necessary foundation, which includes the turbulent political history of Colombia that gave rise to insurgent movements, as well as contemporary circumstances that shape the current situation. In light of the changing nature of the insurgent groups and the US policy distinctions between counter-narcotic and counter-insurgent activities, section three explores the nature of insurgency. What are the necessary and sufficient criteria for classifying a group as insurgent, vice criminal or terrorist? With a clearer understanding of exactly what is required for an insurgency, the FARC is examined to answer the basic research question. How do its actions and ideology match up with relevant criteria? Implications for the debate on US involvement in Colombia are presented in section five.

Colombia is facing an extremely complex problem and related US policy concerns are no simpler. While this paper addresses a very important question, it is also limited in scope. It does not attempt to rule on the merit of the ideologies involved. It makes no attempt to fix blame for the current situation. It does not address the manifold problems of human rights and the Colombian military’s involvement with right-wing paramilitaries. It does not propose a solution to the drug problem or even presume to suggest appropriate US policy. Its purpose is strictly to inform the debate by examining the character one of the “enemies” involved in the struggle.

In the final accounting, the FARC is conducting revolutionary insurgent warfare. Policy makers would do well to remember this when formulating US posture and actions toward the government of Colombia.

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## INTRODUCTION

*"They [FARC] are not fighting for an ideology, but for drugs,"*

Former U.S. Drug Czar, Barry McCaffrey<sup>1</sup>

*"The [FARC] guerrillas haven't abandoned ideology. In the territories where they have influence they govern...They're quite reformist when you look at it, and what they propose for the negotiating table is basically major liberal reforms of the Colombian political system."*

Marc Chernick, Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University<sup>2</sup>

*"Thus it is said that one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes be victorious, sometimes meet with defeat. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement."*

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*<sup>3</sup>

Though the US is physically located in the Western Hemisphere, for most of its history, policy toward the South American countries that share this region has taken a distant second to Euro-centric issues. One of the few areas of concern that has consistently energized contemporary debate about relations with these Southern neighbors is the "war on drugs." Over the past two decades, the problem of illicit drugs entering the country from production centers in South America has skyrocketed. In Colombia, the problem has become increasingly complex as drug trade has merged with a fifty-year-old insurgency that appears to be gaining strength.

Colombia's position in the national discourse has been raised recently with the request by the government of Colombia for \$1.3 billion in financial and materiel aid to support its Plan

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<sup>1</sup> Dick J. Reavis, "FARC Guerrillas Are Rebels Without A Clear Cause," San Antonio Express-News (San Antonio), 16 January 2001.

<sup>2</sup> House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, *Regional Conflict: Colombia's Insurgency and Prospects for a Peaceful Resolution*, 105<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 5 August 1998, available from [http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1998\\_hr/hfa51281\\_0.htm](http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1998_hr/hfa51281_0.htm), Accessed 27 February 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 179.

Colombia, a \$7.5 billion counter-narcotic, counter-insurgency offensive.<sup>4</sup> Recent US policy toward Colombia has been dominated by concerns about narco-trafficking. Although the government of Colombia is dealing with an extremely complex security threat, the US government has chosen to restrict its assistance to only those activities that are both directly contributing to the counter-narcotic effort and distinct from any counter-insurgent efforts. There are oft-stated fears of becoming mired in a Vietnam-style conflict. Unfortunately, the difficulty of distinguishing between counter-narcotic and counter-insurgent operations cannot be overestimated in the present Colombian environment. It seems nearly impossible to tell where the insurgents end and the narco-traffickers begin.

Many pundits and even some government officials attempt to simplify the equation by claiming the dominant insurgent group—Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia--FARC) is no longer a group of revolutionaries driven by ideology and a desire to supplant the existing government, but have instead devolved into a criminal drug organization with an insurgent propagandistic façade. If this conclusion were accurate, it could potentially simplify implementation of US policy and reduce the strings attached to aid for the Colombian government. If, however, this conclusion is flawed (or at least a dangerous oversimplification) the consequences for future US involvement could be grave. In the interest of obeying Sun Tzu's admonition to "know your enemy," it seems prudent to answer the question, "Is the FARC still an insurgency?"

The analysis of this specific inquiry is structured in five sections. The first section describes the importance of the research question. For the issue to be relevant, it must first be established that the US has an interest in what happens to Colombia. Is Colombia a part of the US national security sphere? Once the significance of Colombia has been proven, the next step is to explain why the nature of the FARC has a bearing on US policy in the region.

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<sup>4</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Fact Sheet: *US Support for Plan Colombia*, 19 July 2000, available from



Understanding the FARC in contemporary terms depends on thorough knowledge of their origins. Section two will lay the necessary foundation, which includes the turbulent political history of Colombia that gave rise to insurgent movements. Through the years, the international political landscape changed, as did the relative power of the insurgencies vis-à-vis the government. The advent of promiscuous narcotics trade provided an income that freed the insurgent organizations from the poverty of relying on a dwindling popular base. That same income and the concomitant power that it purchased may have also corrupted the ideals of the insurgency in a way that changed its very nature.

In light of the changing nature of the insurgent groups and the US policy distinctions between counter-narcotic and counter-insurgent activities, it becomes necessary to define exactly what constitutes an insurgency. Section three explores the nature of insurgency. What are the necessary and sufficient criteria for classifying a group as insurgent, vice criminal or terrorist? What are the common characteristics and how are they exemplified? What are the theories that describe potential insurgent progressions?

With a clearer understanding of exactly what is required for an insurgency, the FARC will be examined to answer the basic research question. How do its actions and ideology match up with relevant criteria? Implications for the debate on US involvement in Colombia will be discussed in light of the analysis.

Colombia is facing an extremely complex problem and related US policy concerns are no simpler. While this paper addresses a very important question, it is also limited in scope. It does not attempt to rule on the merit of the ideologies involved. It makes no attempt to fix blame for the current situation. It does not address the manifold problems of human rights and the Colombian military's involvement with right-wing paramilitaries. It does not propose a solution to the drug problem or even presume to suggest appropriate US policy. Its purpose is strictly to

inform the debate by examining the character one of the “enemies” involved in the struggle. The first step in this analysis is to explain why this question matters to the US in the first place.

## Why This Question Matters to the US

*"Should I become president, I will look south, not just as an afterthought but as a fundamental commitment of my presidency."*

George W. Bush during the 2000 Presidential Campaign<sup>5</sup>

*"You got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there."*

Yogi Berra<sup>6</sup>

As President Bush infers in the above quote, South America has traditionally been an afterthought in US foreign policy. Donald Schulz, the Strategic Studies Institute's expert on Latin American affairs characterized the US's preferred posture toward the region as "benign neglect."<sup>7</sup> The American public is relatively ignorant about Colombia and its internal problems. For most people the name Colombia would probably conjure up images of Juan Valdez and his coffee-bean-laden donkey. At best, it would call to mind the high-profile dealings of 1980's cartel figures. Government officials don't appear to be significantly better informed.<sup>8</sup> Is this unfamiliarity excusable, or is there reason for the US be concerned about what happens in Colombia?

## Why Colombia Matters to the US

In fact, Colombia is tremendously relevant to US national security. According to the December 1999 National Security Strategy (NSS), the three core security objectives are: 1) To enhance America's security; 2) To bolster America's economic prosperity; and 3) To promote

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<sup>5</sup> John Diamond, "Clinton's Successor Will Inherit Major Drug War," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago), 3 December 2000.

<sup>6</sup> This quote attributed to Yogi Berra appears in numerous books and on dozens of websites, e.g. <http://thinktank.virtualave.net/quotes.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Donald E. Schulz, *The United States and Latin America: Shaping an Elusive Future*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2000), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Senator John McCain nearly chastised Secretary of Defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld for his confessed ignorance on Colombia during 2001 confirmation hearings for his position. Michael Shifter, "A Risky Policy Unfolds—And No One Is Paying Attention," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), 21 January 2001.

democracy and human rights abroad.<sup>9</sup> Related to these objectives, the NSS delineates three categories of national interests: vital interests, important national interests and humanitarian and other interests.

*Vital* interests affect the “survival, safety and vitality of our nation,” and are worthy of defense, to include decisive military action. Examples of interests falling in this category are safety of US citizens and economic prosperity. Though not critical to national survival, *important* national interests affect our national well-being directly or indirectly by influencing the character of our world. Regions of the world may be considered important national interests if the US has a sizable economic stake in the area, or if they contain crises that may potentially lead to significantly destabilizing refugee migration. *Humanitarian and other* interests refers to a broad category of values-motivated concerns that includes, for example, promoting democracy and respect for the rule of law.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding the indifference of the American public and many officials, Colombia is not only related to the broad objectives of the NSS, it can be linked directly to stated examples of *vital*, *important* and *other* interests.

## Democracy

Though the promotion of democracy is listed as an “other” national interest in the NSS, it has been the hallmark of American values and character since before the inception of the country. Throughout its history, the US has worked to bring about democratic regimes and to support those democracies already in existence. Colombia is the oldest democracy in South America.<sup>11</sup> As such, the cause of promoting democracy in Latin America would be hindered if Colombia proved unable to maintain a stable and responsive governmental system. This is not an unlikely possibility given the checkered history of democracy in the region and the specific warts of the Colombian system which while democratic, is not strongly participatory. Already, there is

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<sup>9</sup> Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy For A New Century* (Washington DC: The White House, 1999), iii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

rampant lawlessness and strife in those regions of the country that lack a strong government presence. Nearly 10 Colombians are killed every day in politically motivated action.<sup>12</sup> Colombia records over 30,000 annual homicides, 85 percent of which are caused by pervasive criminal violence,<sup>13</sup> and over 98 percent of all crimes in this troubled state remain unsolved and unpunished.<sup>14</sup> Democracy and the rule of law are threatened in Colombia and the loss of this democratic partner could easily translate into increased instability for the entire region.

### Regional Stability

The effects of Colombia's internal difficulties are already being felt in countries throughout the Central and South America. Both the insurgency and drug trafficking have caused considerable problems, particularly with the border states of Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama. Brazil, Peru and the rest of Central America and the Caribbean are affected less directly, but fear the escalation of war and increase in drug trafficking could lead to more direct impact. As the maelstrom intensifies, guerrilla border crossings increase and the incidence of powerful right-wing self-defense forces following them is becoming alarmingly more frequent.<sup>15</sup> All this occurs at a time when military budgets in the entire region have been reduced, leaving a vacuum of power in the sparsely inhabited Andean border areas.<sup>16</sup> There is even evidence of sympathetic insurgent elements in neighboring countries. Northern Ecuador has seen the birth of two new youth leftist groups, one of which is a disturbing echo of the FARC.<sup>17</sup>

Lawlessness and violence in Colombia have secondary effects, as well. In response to the terror, many Colombians have fled their homes in search of safety. Colombia has the third

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Gilman and Dan Burton, "Now the Hard Work Begins," *Washington Times* (Washington DC), 13 September 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Marcella and Donald Shulz, Colombia's *Three Wars: US Strategy at the Crossroads*, (Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1999), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> David Spencer and Heather Noss, *Colombia: Strategic End State, Goals, and Means...A Workshop Report*, (Alexandria, VA: Center For Strategic Studies, 2000), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

largest internally displaced population in the world, surpassed only by Sudan and Angola.<sup>18</sup> Over two million people have joined the ranks of the Colombian homeless in just the past five years.<sup>19</sup> Though harmless as individuals, massive flows of refugees are anything but benign for neighboring countries that receive them. All of these factors combine to produce present conditions that are not only compelling for the countries in the region, but also troubling for US trade relations and economic development and provide the clear potential for rapid deterioration.

### Economic Well-being

For all its cultural and political struggles, Colombia is important to US economic prosperity. Two-way trade with Colombia reached nearly \$11 billion in 2000.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps more strategically germane, Colombia is an exporter of oil. It is individually the seventh-largest supplier of crude oil to the US,<sup>21</sup> but combines with neighbors Venezuela and Ecuador (both of which provide transit routes for drug traffic) to supply 20 percent of US oil imports.<sup>22</sup> Considering all categories of goods (e.g. coffee, fruit, leather goods, fresh-cut flowers) Colombia is the fourth most important US trading partner in South America.<sup>23</sup> Over 400 of the “Fortune

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony Faiola, “Colombia’s Creeping War,” *Washington Post* (Washington DC), 1 October 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Shifter, “A Risky Policy Unfolds—And No One Is Paying Attention,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles CA), 21 January 2001. Michael Shifter is senior fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue and teaChés Latin American politics at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service.

<sup>19</sup> Spencer and Noss, 9.

<sup>20</sup> US Department of Commerce, Foreign Trade Division, *US Trade Balance With Colombia*, available from <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c3010.html>, accessed 13 April 2001.

<sup>21</sup> US Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, Country Brief: *Colombia*, available from <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/colombia.html>, accessed 13 April 2001.

<sup>22</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Fact Sheet: *US Support for Plan Colombia, Why Americans Should Care*, 14 July 2000, available from [http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/colombia/fs\\_000714\\_americans.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/colombia/fs_000714_americans.html), accessed 7 April 2001.

<sup>23</sup> David Passage, *The United States and Colombia: Untying the Gordian Knot*, (Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2000), 4. Ambassador David Passage is a 33-year veteran of the U.S. Foreign Service who retired from the State Department in September 1998. He has had extensive experience with both Latin America and guerrilla insurgencies in various parts of the world. Ambassador Passage was political officer at the American embassy in Quito, Ecuador, during the mid-1970s and Deputy Chief of Mission/Charge d’Affaires at the American Embassy in El Salvador at the height of that country’s civil war, from 1984 to 1986. Coincidentally, he spent 6 years as a youth in Colombia and was in Bogotá during the violent uprising in May 1948 which sparked a decade-long civil war known as La Violencia. At the end of his career, Ambassador Passage was Director of Andean Affairs at the State Department, with responsibility for the overall conduct of U.S. relations with Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.

500” companies conduct business in Colombia, many through direct operations, while others use wholly-owned subsidiaries, franchises or licensing/marketing arrangements with indigenous companies.<sup>24</sup>

The presence of these multi-national corporations in Colombia produces more than a financial interest for the US. Some 35,000 American citizens live and work in Colombia with a reasonable and valid expectation the US government will look after their safety and human rights, just as is normal in other areas of the world.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it becomes clear how the issue of Colombia aspires to the level of vital national interest. Beyond the direct threat of physical harm to US citizens in Colombia, there is the pervasive evil of illicit drugs endangering even those citizens at home.

## Drugs

The 1999 NSS identifies drug trafficking as a transnational threat to the “safety and well-being of the American people,” clearly placing it in the category of *vital* interest.<sup>26</sup> Colombia is a huge part of that threat. Colombia has surpassed Bolivia and Peru to become the world’s largest grower of coca plants, producing 80 percent of the world’s cocaine from this deadly crop.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Colombian narco-traffickers have responded to increased demand for heroin by stepping up the cultivation of poppies to produce at least 65 percent of the heroin consumed in the US.<sup>28</sup> This multi-faceted problem produces effects ranging from death (100,000 persons in the US last decade) to lost productivity, crime, policing, incarceration, rehabilitation, insurance and hospital care—total cost to society is an estimated \$300 billion.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Marcella and Schulz, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Clinton, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Marcella and Schulz, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Percentage of consumption traceable to Colombian sources is inferred from the percentage of heroin seized in the US in 1998 that was traced to Colombia by the US Department of Justice. US Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, *Traffickers From Colombia*, available from <http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/traffickers/colombia.htm> accessed on 9 February 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Marcella and Schulz, 7.

Even this cursory analysis of the national security connections with Colombia makes clear the importance of Colombia to the US. Understanding that Colombian insurgents contribute to each of the threats described above makes it apparent these insurgents are an important concern, as well. What is not as obvious is why it matters whether the FARC is still an insurgency or it has transformed into some other type of organization.

### **Why the Distinction is Relevant**

As the saying goes, when the only tool available is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Fortunately, the US government is better outfitted. There is a variety of means to affect the security sphere: negotiation, embargo, trade sanctions, financial aid, diplomatic legitimacy, military hardware, training, technological exchange, direct military action, etc. In order to select the best implement from such a complete tool chest, it becomes important to distinguish between a nail and a screw. Determining the true nature of the FARC is crucial to choosing the correct national security instrument(s) and strategy to use in protecting and promoting US interests.

### **Defining Issue for Policy: Echoes of Vietnam**

Colombia's complex struggle contains elements of both counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics. The American public is fairly comfortable with a counter-narcotics role. Drugs have been successfully stigmatized in American society and the late 1980's campaign against the infamous Cali and Medellin cartels is viewed as a successful endeavor. By contrast, the first mention of counter-insurgency seems invariably to induce traumatic flashbacks of the US's ill-fated expedition into Vietnam. There is such a deep-seated societal fear of getting caught in "another Vietnam," that the Clinton administration and military planners labeled military personnel assisting the Colombian Army as "trainers" instead of "advisors," solely to avoid any allusion to the military advisors that were the precursor to American involvement in Indochina.<sup>30</sup> There is even public suspicion that former drug czar Barry McCaffrey's recent statements that the



FARC is merely a cartel are meant to pave the way for an increased US involvement in Colombia by skirting the thorny issue of counter-insurgency.<sup>31</sup> The paranoia runs deep, but not without good reason. Counter-insurgency is a daunting mission that is particularly problematic when the American people and their elected representatives do not perceive a vital US interest involved. Consequently, current US Policy distinguishes sharply between counter-insurgency and counter-narcotic operations and issues. This policy choice is manifested in two areas: direct actions by the US and; indirectly, by the stipulations attached to US aid and the diplomatic pressure applied to influence Colombian actions.

### US Actions

As stated above, there is a full range of options for influencing the situation in Colombia. Obviously, a decision to involve US troops in combat would be a significant escalation of American involvement. Such a decision would unquestionably require a full analysis of the environment and the players—specifically the goals, strategy and tactics of the adversaries—as well as, the objectives, strategy and tactics for US troops. However, the simple reality that the US is *currently* operating inside Colombia makes it important to determine the appropriate guidelines and strategy to regulate and integrate their actions in support of national interests. Though under very strict guidelines and close scrutiny, American military personnel and civilian contractors are presently in the country performing a variety of duties. The current restrictions limit direct involvement to 500 military personnel and 300 civilians.<sup>32</sup> The president can waive this threshold, but not without informing Congress.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Eric Rosenberg, “Colombia Effort Raises Fears of Another Vietnam,” *San Antonio Express-News* (San Antonio TX), 15 January 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Juan O. Tomayo, “US Officials Tie Colombian Guerrillas To Drug Exports,” *Miami Herald*, 13 December 2000.

<sup>32</sup> Kevin G. Hall, “Colombia’s Neighbors Fear Widening of Drug War,” *Philadelphia Enquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), 18 October 2000.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Rosenberg, “Personnel Cap In US Aid To Colombia a Concern,” *Miami Herald* (Miami, FL), 10 October 2000.

Although the Pentagon indicates the military cap is high enough to allow soldiers to accomplish their desired training goals, the 300-person civilian cap has been labeled problematic, potentially foreshadowing an increase.<sup>34</sup> Many of the actions being taken to discourage the production of drugs are being accomplished by civilians. Their involvement ranges from piloting defoliation aircraft to stimulating alternative crop cultivation to human rights training for the national police to special training for judges and prosecutors.<sup>35</sup> Many of these actions are low-risk, but some clearly place lives in danger (e.g. crewmembers on aerial spray aircraft targeted by small arms, or even shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles). What is the status of these individuals if they are captured by FARC guerrillas? How will the US government respond to the situation if it hasn't examined (or has mis-characterized for the sake of expediency) the nature of the organization?

### US Influence on Colombian Actions

Regardless of the exigencies created by direct US participation, the nature of the FARC is still important. One of the methods to execute policy with respect to another country is by influencing its government to act in certain ways consistent with the American viewpoint. This can be accomplished by placing conditions on the use of monetary aid, restrictions on the use of US-provided equipment (e.g. helicopters for counter-narcotic, but not counter-insurgent missions), diplomatic pressure, trade restrictions, etc. In this way, US is practically implementing policy by proxy. Foreign policy actions carried out in this fashion (versus direct action) should be no less informed about the nature of the threat involved. While American lives are not directly at stake, the goal is still to support national interests. Pressuring the Colombian government to pursue a particular course of action, absent an accurate appraisal of what is likely to achieve the desired end would be counter productive. Ignorance is generally not considered a force multiplier.

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<sup>34</sup> Rosenberg.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Although most of the above discussion has used generalities, there are a couple specific situations that serve to illustrate the potential conflicts arising from an unexamined or ill-informed policy decision. Critics of the Colombian military and its human rights record, insist the national police must be responsible for eradicating the threat, often citing their success against the 1980s cartels.<sup>36</sup> If the insurgent threat is merely a cartel in wolf's clothing, their advice might be constructive. If however, there is a true insurgency willing to equip and train an army to conduct large-unit, military operations in order to usurp governmental authority, the national police would plainly be the wrong choice.

At the tactical level, the US has committed to provide UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters to Colombian Army, air-mobile, counter-narcotic battalions for use strictly in counter-narcotic operations.<sup>37</sup> Since the insurgents and drug producers operate in the same areas (and are reportedly merging into one integrated entity—narco-insurgent), it is likely counter-narcotic and counter-insurgent units will be in the same general areas. If one of the counter-insurgent units was being overrun by guerrillas, would the Colombian counter-narcotic unit sit idly by while their countrymen were decimated, or rush to their aid and risk the ire of US politicians intent on preserving the artificial barrier between the two wars? What if US military “trainers” were attached to the counter-narcotic unit? The problem in this case would be even more vexing.

Colombia is an important partner in promoting democracy, economic development and the American way of life. The FARC threatens those goals. Crafting a policy to deal with the

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<sup>36</sup> Newspapers across the country are replete with this advice, and not only in the opinion-editorial section. Just a few examples: “Second Thoughts on Colombia,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago IL), 18 November 2000; “Colombia’s Center Cannot Hold,” *Washington Times* (Washington DC), 26 November 2000; Kathryn Welford, “US Isn’t Helping Colombia,” *Baltimore Sun*, (Baltimore MD), 27 February 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Robert B. Charles, “Clear Warning: Drugs, Defense, Congress and the Colombia Crisis 2000,” *Armed Forces Journal International* (December 2000): 10.

FARC (and the multifaceted drug problem) must be accomplished with a correct assessment of the nature of the insurgency and its connection to the drug trade. An understanding of the historical/cultural context of the country is the first step toward that assessment.

## The Colombian Context

*The most striking single feature of the Colombian guerrilla experience, especially but not only for the FARC, is how thoroughly the entire guerrilla experience has been rooted in local experiences in the countryside. The whole history of violence in a number of rural areas appears to have made them prime real estate for harboring the guerrilla warfare of the 1960s, without the need to import either organization or ideology from the urban-educated revolutionary intellectuals who so thoroughly dominated revolutionary leadership elsewhere.*

Timothy P. Wickam-Crowley  
Assistant Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University<sup>38</sup>

Colombia is only a two-and-a-half hour flight from Miami, but as alluded previously, Colombian history is a blind spot in American understanding of its own hemisphere. Because the history of this troubled Andean state is integral to comprehending the complexity of the present struggle, analysis must begin with a survey of Colombia's heritage of democracy, insurgency and violence.

### Early History

Initial conquest of northern South America was accomplished by the Spanish who permanently settled the region in 1525 and established the area that would become Colombia as an official colony in 1549.<sup>39</sup> In 1717 the Viceroyalty of New Granada was instituted with Santa fe de Bogotá as its capital (at this point, the colony encompassed modern day Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama).<sup>40</sup> During the course of the next decade, there were a number of revolts against Spanish rule (most notably the Comunero Revolution in 1780), which though quelled by Spanish might, provided the spark for the emerging independence movement.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 146.

<sup>39</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, *Background Note: Colombia*, April 2001, available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/bgn/index.cfm?docid=1831>, accessed 7 April 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Interestingly, the official name of Colombia's capital city remained Santa fe de Bogotá until August 2000 when it was officially shortened to "Bogotá."

<sup>41</sup> "Colombia, Important Dates," *Microsoft Encarta 98*, cd-rom.

Independence began on 20 July 1810 when the denizens of Bogota seated the first representative council in defiance of Spanish authority.<sup>42</sup> In 1813, full independence was proclaimed with Spanish troops arriving in the colony in 1814 whereupon a bitter struggle ensued.<sup>43</sup> In 1819, the Republic of Greater Colombia emerged including all the territory of the former colony.

Throughout its history, Colombian politics have been dominated by two distinct political entities—the Liberals and Conservatives—the roots of which trace all the way back to the first administration. Conservative supporters of Simon Bolivar, liberator of much of Latin America and the first president of Colombia, favored strong central government, alliance with the Roman Catholic Church and limited suffrage. Liberal followers of Francisco de Paula Santander, the first vice president, preferred stronger regional government, state rather than church control of education and other matters, and broadened franchise.<sup>44</sup> Neither faction enjoyed control for long. In fact, each party has held the presidency for approximately the same number of years through to present day.

Despite a track record of regular, free and open elections, Colombia's rocky course was punctuated with widespread, violent conflict. The earlier struggles occurred between the armies of regional overlords who dominated areas of the countryside and demonstrated the weakness of central government control. The culmination of this battle of the landed aristocracy culminated in the 1899-1902 War of a Thousand Days, which cost an estimated 100,000 lives.<sup>45</sup> This tragedy was merely a foreshadowing of the violence that would return a generation later as La Violencia.

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<sup>42</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, *Background Note: Colombia*.

<sup>43</sup> Microsoft Encarta 98.

<sup>44</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, *Background Note: Colombia*.

<sup>45</sup> John Walton, *Reluctant Rebels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 76. Ecuador and Venezuela withdrew from the republic in 1830 and Panama became independent in 1903 when the US “engineered the transparent Panama revolt” in preparation for the Panama Canal project.

## La Violencia

A number of factors produced the fuel and tinder for La Violencia (literally *The Violence*). Growing markets of new goods and participation in international trade drew a great influx of foreign capital. International investment supported a robust growth of production (in the 1920s gross domestic product growth averaged 7.3 percent per annum), but also caused rampant inflation.<sup>46</sup> The result was a grossly inequitable distribution of prosperity. The increasing disparity between the upper and working classes coupled with the proliferation of proletarian doctrines following the Russian Revolution produced a social dynamic that began to threaten the existing two-party equilibrium.

Both the Liberals and Conservatives were elitist with sometimes only subtle ideological differences, but the reforms enacted by the Liberals in the 1930s and 1940s had enfranchised elements that favored a populist crusade over business as usual.<sup>47</sup> At this pivotal time, a charismatic liberal politician, Jorge Gaitán decided to challenge the moderate elements of both parties. The result was a split liberal vote and Conservative seizure of power. The Conservatives recognized their exposed position and set about crushing the sources of the populism that threatened it.<sup>48</sup> The response was sporadic conflict until the assassination of Gaitán in 1948 sparked a new character of violence that eventually spread beyond the towns to the countryside.<sup>49</sup>

One of the effects of La Violencia was to further deepen the divide between the western departments (where the lion's share of development had occurred) and the eastern departments, which remained traditionally rural. The epicenter of La Violencia was in the west while the eastern departments took on the character of independent peasant republics, reflecting both the need for collective defense against the violence and the negligible presence of central government

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 88

<sup>48</sup> The new government broke up the labor federation, repealed many of the liberal labor and social reforms, tightened censorship and initiated military action against Liberal peasants. Walton, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Wickam-Crowley, 17.

control.<sup>50</sup> These independent republics were the seedbed for the guerrilla movements of future years. La Violencia was ended by a military coup, though the conflict continued at a reduced level and racked up a toll of more than 200,000 killed over 15 years<sup>51</sup>. Gen Gustavo Rojas Pinilla came to power through the coup and enjoyed popular support in 1953, but after four years of dictatorship, the military ousted him with the support of both political parties.<sup>52</sup>

## National Front

The reconciliation evident in the political cooperation to end Pinilla's military rule extended to the "Declaration of Sitges," which created a governmental system called the National Front. A former president from each party signed this agreement which instituted a unique system of shared power in which the presidency would alternate between the parties with parity in all other elective and appointive offices.<sup>53</sup> This declaration was an expedient move for the two parties, and benefited the rest of the country by calming the violence, but all other political entities were excluded from the process. The populist constituents that had supported Gaitán were not represented, nor were the rural republics in the east or the growing communist element. This arrangement enabled the elite to stop the violence, reconsolidate their power base and institute "those changes in the social order that would both advance elite material interests and ward off social revolution."<sup>54</sup> But while social revolution was postponed, the lack of representation fueled anti-government sentiment in the rural areas and pushed the guerrillas into the arms of the communist ideologues operating in the eastern departments. The National Front lasted until 1974 when bipartisan elections resumed.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Exploring Revolution: Essays on Latin American Insurgency and Revolutionary Theory*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1991), 136.

<sup>51</sup> Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, *Background Note: Colombia*.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Walton, 98.

<sup>55</sup> Institute for Global Communications, *An Overview of Recent Colombian History*, available from <http://www.igc.org/colhrnet/timeline.htm>, accessed 9 Apr 2001.



## Birth of Insurgent Groups

The insurgent groups that plague Colombia today emerged during La Violencia and the National Front. The confluence of three factors made the region ripe for revolutionary sentiment: the autonomy of the peasant republics, lack of representation in the National Front system and the military suppression of the eastern departments to reassert government control. As mentioned earlier, communism benefited from these ingredients, though the degree to which imported ideology energized the movement has been frequently exaggerated. The conditions and events that characterized Colombia's early history provided more than enough incentive to mobilize the peasantry.

## Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia--FARC)

During the initial years of the National Front, the government became concerned with the possibility of a Cuban-style revolution emerging from the independent, peasant republics that had developed during La Violencia. To counter that threat, the first step was to cast these guerrillas as bandits and subversives (an easy task given their criminal enterprises) in order to legitimize a military role in internal security. Next, increasing domestic and military budgets augmented by US aid gave the government and the army the resources to conduct comprehensive counter-insurgency operations.<sup>56</sup> Though these operations were largely successful, the guerrillas were both resilient and persistent.

In response to these devastating attacks, the remaining guerrillas began to coalesce and organize. In eastern Colombia, Manuel Marulanda Velez, known by his *nom de guerre*, Tirofijo (Sureshot), led a group of 48 poorly armed and supplied men who formed the nucleus that became the FARC.<sup>57</sup> Their stated agenda was "a revolutionary programme calling together all the

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<sup>56</sup> Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, "Colombia: Civic Action, Counterinsurgency, and Internal Security," *Colombia, A Country Study*, available from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cotoc.html>, accessed 18 April 2001.

<sup>57</sup> FARC-EP, *Our History: 36 Years For Peace and National Sovereignty*, available from <http://www.farc-ep.org>, accessed 19 April 2001.

citizens who dream of a Colombia for Colombians, with equality of opportunities and equitable distribution of wealth and where among us all we can build peace with social equality and sovereignty.”<sup>58</sup> This program remains to the present demanding specific reforms which include massive redistribution of land and wealth, state control of resources, increased social welfare spending, and (more recently added) a non-military solution to the problem of illegal drugs.<sup>59</sup> The FARC was officially established in 1966, in cooperation with the Communist Party of Colombia (Partido Comunista de Colombia—PCC).<sup>60</sup> The two groups shared an ideology, but it is important to remember the FARC was not transplanted from Cuba or some other communist surrogate; it arose from its own unique milieu in eastern Colombia.

### National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional--ELN)

The conditions and events that accompanied the inception of the FARC were not unique to eastern Colombia. In 1964 in the central highlands of the country, guerrillas inspired by disenfranchisement and the Cuban revolution formed the ELN. Predictably, their ideology was standard Marxist-Leninist communism.<sup>61</sup> Insurrectionist activities initially included seizing small towns, freeing prisoners from jails, robbing banks and making recruiting speeches criticizing the government.<sup>62</sup> The ELN was the first organized guerrilla organization and in the late 1960s, was considered the most effective. Perhaps for that reason, as well as its relative proximity to the seat of government, Colombian counter-insurgency operations concentrated against the ELN and by 1973 it was prematurely reported to be “virtually destroyed” by the armed forces.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> James L. Zackrison and Eileen Bradley, “Colombian Sovereignty Under Siege,” *Strategic Forum* 112 (May 1997), available from <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/forum112.html>, accessed 12 April 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Stratfor, *Stratfor Special Report: The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia*, 14 August 1999, available from <http://www.stratfor.com/world/specialreports/special3.htm>, accessed 2 March 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Marcella and Schulz, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, “Colombia: The National Liberation Army,” *Colombia, A Country Study*, available from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cotoc.html>, accessed 18 April 2001.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

## **Others**

Two additional insurgent groups participated in operations against the government in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1965, pro-Chinese communists split from the Soviet-line PCC to form the PCC-Marxist-Leninist (PCC-ML). This same group formed the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación-- EPL) early in 1968 as the armed wing of the new party, following Maoist ideology.<sup>64</sup> The last constituted insurgent organization was the 19th of April Movement (Movimiento 19 de Abril--M-19), which took its name from the date in 1970 of allegedly fraudulent elections which denied the presidency to former dictator Pinilla. Pushing an ideological mixture of populism and nationalistic revolutionary socialism, this band of guerrillas sought political support from Cuba and Nicaragua and was perhaps the boldest in the early days of the four primary rebel assemblies.<sup>65</sup> The proliferation of insurgency throughout the country gives testimony to the widespread discontent with the Colombian history of elitism and the specific evils of the National Front system, as well as the fractionalized nature of the country. Still, it is easier to spark a revolutionary movement than to maintain it.

## **Hard Times**

The fortune of the guerrilla movements ebbed and flowed through the 1970s and 1980s but this period was marked by several key occurrences that helped shape the present Colombian environment. As stated above, military counter-insurgency efforts of the 1960s and early 1970s focused primarily (though not exclusively) on the ELN leading to a marked decrease in their impact on the revolutionary effort. Government austerity programs and labor strikes fed a growing discontent with the government throughout the 1970s; the benefit accrued to the

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<sup>64</sup> Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, "Colombia: The Popular Liberation Army," *Colombia, A Country Study*, available from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cotoc.html>, accessed 18 April 2001.

<sup>65</sup> Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, "Colombia: The 19<sup>th</sup> of April Movement," *Colombia, A Country Study*, available from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cotoc.html>, accessed 18 April 2001. M-19 made attacks directly on the ruling administration. They kidnapped high government officials, seized the Dominican Republic's Bogotá embassy, and captured the Palace of Justice leading to the deaths of 11 Supreme Court justices.

guerrillas.<sup>66</sup> During the 1980s, international sponsorship waned, as the Colombian government opened relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union was consumed by its own regional challenges.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to military operations, the Colombian government made a series of attempts at a negotiated peace, most notably during the administration of conservative Belisario Betancur in 1984.<sup>68</sup> During the course of these negotiations, the main body of FARC fighters renounced armed struggle only to resume the crusade in response to the violence of the emerging right wing, paramilitary movement.<sup>69</sup> The negotiations were not without effect though. By early 1990, M-19 laid down their arms in response to a promise of full amnesty and inclusion in the legal political process.<sup>70</sup> M-19 even became a target of the remaining FARC and ELN for their collusion with the government. The other significant development during this period was the growth of drug production and international trafficking.

## Drugs

By the late 1970s, drug trade was truly becoming a problem in Colombia. Fueled by international demand (largely from the US), drug traffickers were creating a parallel economy. This black market impacted the country by competing for financial resources, sowing widespread corruption in all branches of government and laying waste to the countryside by displacing legitimate crops with marijuana and other illicit crops.<sup>71</sup> Although there was evidence the guerrillas were profiting from the drug business, they were nibbling around the edges with the majority of the wealth going to narcotics business organizations called cartels.

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<sup>66</sup> Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, "Colombia: The Liberal Tenure," *Colombia, A Country Study*, available from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cotoc.html>, accessed 18 April 2001.

<sup>67</sup> By the 1980s, FARC leader, Marulanda, denied any ties to the pro-Soviet PCC. Wickam-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, 145.

<sup>68</sup> Institute for Global Communications.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Of course there are two sides to every story. There are also indications hard-liners in the FARC refused the ceasefire and continued the battle, thereby inciting retaliation from the right wing paramilitaries.

<sup>70</sup> Wickam-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, 212.

<sup>71</sup> Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, "Colombia: The Liberal Tenure."

## The Cartels

The Colombian cartels of the 1980s earned their title well. A cartel is simply “a combination of independent businesses formed to regulate production, pricing, and marketing of goods by the members.”<sup>72</sup> In this case the “goods” were drugs, mostly marijuana at the beginning with explosive growth of cocaine production as its trendiness increased in the US and Europe. The “independent businesses” were all the elements to form a vertically integrated supply chain: the peasant growers, the harvesters, the marketers and a host of tasks associated with holding the government at bay.<sup>73</sup>

The best known of the cartels were the Medellín and Cali cartels, named for the cities in Colombia where they were based.<sup>74</sup> Government preoccupation with insurgents during the 1970s gave the traffickers a relatively benign environment to incubate. By the 1980s, they had consolidated the constituent activities of the drug trade and become multi-billion dollar industries. During the Betancur and Barco administrations, conflict with the cartels was intensified in response to the increasingly brutal tactics of the traffickers. This “war without quarter” included commitment of the military to the interdiction effort.<sup>75</sup> With the help of the US government, a committed effort by the Colombian national police and military forces began to make progress. In 1993 Medellín cartel leader, Pablo Escobar, was killed in a police shootout marking the decline of the large cartels.<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, the demand for narcotics had not been affected and the production base of peasant farmers and middlemen remained. The defunct cartels left in their wake a fractured collection of multiple, smaller and often-competing trafficking organizations ripe for exploitation by opportunistic guerrillas.

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<sup>72</sup> *Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary* (Boston: The Riverside Publishing Co., 1988).

<sup>73</sup> These activities include assassination, kidnapping and other acts of terror, but also legal maneuvering, bribery and direct, legal involvement in politics.

<sup>74</sup> Ronald Chépesiuk, *Hard Target: The United States War Against International Drug Trafficking, 1982-1997* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1999), 17.

<sup>75</sup> Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, “Colombia: Narcotics Control and Interdiction,” *Colombia, A Country Study*, available from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cotoc.html>, accessed 18 April 2001.

<sup>76</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, *Background Note: Colombia*.

## The Narco-Insurgent Nexus

While the insurgents had been involved in contraband since their inception—from drugs to weapons to the black marketing of legitimate goods—the breakup of the cartels gave them a pivotal opportunity to cash in. Whereas previously the strength of the cartel defense apparatuses limited the guerrilla's ability to extract money from the narcotics industry, they now had the upper hand. Instead of leasing protection services to a dominant cartel, they were in a position to set the terms of the contract with smaller factions of the previous trafficking organizations.

In the absence of the mega-cartel leadership, the FARC began to establish ties with the *Cocaleros* (coca farmers), as well with the remaining traffickers. Their primary means of income generation was taxation of all aspects of the narcotics trade that occurred within their zone of control, e.g. crops, paste production and transportation.<sup>77</sup> With full coffers, the guerrillas went to the black market for more and increasingly sophisticated arms to pursue their revolutionary struggle. They purchased (or exchanged for drugs) weapons from crime syndicates around the world (Chechnya, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan), though they also were supplied by Middle Eastern governments and corrupt officials within the administrations of Latin America.<sup>78</sup>

The boon of illicit drug money freed the FARC from the poverty of relying on peasant support and the unreliable profits of kidnapping and theft. This gave rise to an ugly cycle: the drug trade armed and strengthened the FARC who in turn used their might to enhance their resources by creating and maintaining an environment conducive to increased drug production. Serendipitously, in 1994 the Ernesto Samper administration was embroiled in scandal as allegations his political campaign had taken donations from the Cali cartel were proven true.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> George H. Franco, "Their Darkest Hour: Colombia's Government and the Narco-Insurgency," *Parameters* XXX, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 87. Coca paste is an intermediate form between coca leaves and processed cocaine.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. "Reports indicate that as much as 90 percent of the ammunition used by the insurgents may come from Venezuelan army stocks and was sold to them by corrupt officials in the neighboring country."

<sup>79</sup> Chépesiuk, 149.

Subsequent decertification<sup>80</sup> by the US in 1996-97 led not only to a loss of substantial aid, but a weakened position both domestically and internationally for the Samper government. The FARC took full advantage to consolidate their operations and by 1997 boasted nearly a billion-dollar annual income.<sup>81</sup> Beyond the financial realm, they also significantly increased their membership, growing to 17,000 guerrillas operating in 67 fronts.<sup>82</sup>

Andres Pastrana succeeded Samper running on a platform exclusively focused on bringing about a peaceful resolution of Colombia's decades-old civil war and combating the illegal drug economy. His approach is reminiscent of the Barco administration of the late 1980s. In an attempt to entice the insurgents into joining the legal political system, he declared a demilitarized zone in south central Colombia. This region (often referred to as FARC-landia) is about the size of Switzerland and twice the area of neighboring El Salvador.<sup>83</sup> Unfortunately, negotiations to this point have been fruitless. The FARC has declined talks a number of times and refuses to make any concessions, attempting instead to shift the focus to the evils of the increasingly active paramilitary organizations it claims the government supports.

In the meantime, the guerrillas are further solidifying their economic plan by taking on the upper-level duties of a drug cartel. They have long been accused of participating in not only the production of coca paste, but also the international commercialization of the deadly product. Recently Colombian army chief, General Jorge Enrique Mora, reported a raid on the headquarters of one of the FARC commanders uncovered evidence to implicate the guerrillas in every aspect of the drug trade—from cultivation, to processing to international trafficking.<sup>84</sup> In response to this evidence, the Colombian military (echoed by many other voices in the international

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<sup>80</sup> In order to qualify for US aid, countries must be annually certified as faithful partners in the war against drugs.

<sup>81</sup> Zackrison and Bradley.

<sup>82</sup> Marcella and Schulz, 10.

<sup>83</sup> "Pastrana's Decision: Time for Colombia to Call the FARC Guerrillas' Bluff," Miami Herald, 31 January 2001.

<sup>84</sup> Margarita Martinez, *Rebel Leader Faces Drug Arrest*, Associated Press, available from [http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/ap/20010410/wl/colombia\\_rebels\\_drugs\\_1.html](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/ap/20010410/wl/colombia_rebels_drugs_1.html), accessed 21 April 2001.

community) renewed their claims that the FARC *is* a cartel. Others phrase the statement differently by asserting that the FARC is no longer an insurgency. Is this true? To assess that claim it is necessary to examine concept of insurgency itself.



## What is an Insurgency?

*The central task and the highest form of a revolution is to seize political power by armed force, to settle problems by force.*

Mao Tse-tung  
*Problems of War and Strategy*, 1954<sup>85</sup>

*One does not necessarily have to wait for a revolutionary situation: it can be created.*

Ernesto ‘Ché’ Guevara  
*Guerrilla Warfare*, 1961<sup>86</sup>

Before tackling the question “Is the FARC still an insurgency?” it is critical to determine just what an insurgency is and is not. What is it distinct from and what concepts, goals and motivations can it be mixed with and still retain its essential character? Definitions must come first. With terms defined the theory can be examined to determine the relevant elements of insurgency to be used as criteria for the final analysis.

### Definitions and Discussion

As with most concepts, there is a multitude of definitions for the term insurgency. According to Joint Publication 1-02 (the definition approved for joint and North Atlantic Treaty Organization use), an insurgency is “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict.”<sup>87</sup> This definition includes three important elements: organization (implies a unifying principle or *ideology*), an objective (*overthrow*), and the method (*subversion and armed conflict*). It is also appealingly simple.

Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 2-7.1 *Foreign Internal Defense*, includes a slightly broader definition: “Insurgency is a complex, protracted form of subversion employing psychological pressure, armed force, and terror to force or prevent social, economic, and political

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<sup>85</sup> Peter G. Tsouras, *Warriors’ Words: A Quotation Book* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1992), 376.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Joint Publication 102, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, (Washington DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1994), 228.

changes within the host nation.”<sup>88</sup> This definition includes the use of terror as a method and acknowledges the possibility of either a negative or a positive aim that may be less ambitious than overthrow of the government. This possibility of a goal short of overthrow is echoed in US Army Field Manual 100-20.

*An insurgency is an organized, armed political struggle whose goal may be the seizure of power through revolutionary takeover and replacement of the existing government. In some case, however, an insurgency’s goals may be more limited. For example, the insurgency may intend to break away from government control and establish an autonomous state within traditional ethnic or religious territorial bounds. The insurgency may also only intend to extract limited political concessions unattainable through less violent means.*<sup>89</sup>

These definitions all identify the importance of goals in discussing insurgency. Dr. Bard O’Neill, director of studies of insurgency and revolution at the National War College, also emphasizes the fundamental differences in insurgencies based on their particular goal orientation. He suggests seven types—anarchist, egalitarian, traditionalist, pluralist, secessionist, reformist, and preservationist.<sup>90</sup> Of these seven, Bard classifies the first four as revolutionary because their goal is to change completely an existing political system. That distinction is key to the purpose of this paper. If the FARC have a limited goal that leaves the elected government in place and merely extracts concessions or reforms, the impact on the US probably will not rise to the level of either a vital or an important national interest as articulated earlier. For this reason, the criteria for assessing the FARC must include a revolutionary goal of supplanting the present government. With that point established, it will be helpful to examine revolutionary theory.

## **Revolutionary Theory**

Contemporary thoughts on revolution seem to be guided by several specific theories of how revolutions begin and progress. The first and most prevalent is based on the writings of Karl Marx. Perhaps the twentieth century was affected just as much by the revolutionary philosophy

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<sup>88</sup> *Air Force Doctrine Document 2-7.1, Foreign Internal Defense*, (Maxwell AFB: AF Doctrine Center, 1999), 5.

<sup>89</sup> *Field Manual 100-20, Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*, (Washington DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1990), 2-0.

of Mao Tse-tung. The final relevant theory is a modification of Marxism peculiar to Latin America: the Foco theory of revolution espoused by Fidel Castro and Che Guevarra. What follows is a quick overview of each theory.

### Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Theory

For Karl Marx, the central fact of social evolution was class struggle. In his view the development of capitalism magnified the natural antagonism between those that produce (*proletariat*) and those that enjoy the fruits of proletariat labor by virtue of owning the means of production (*bourgeoisie*).<sup>91</sup> This antagonism eventually reaches the point of revolution whereby the proletariat rises up in defiance to unseat the illegitimate government of the bourgeoisie. Marx's proletariat victory is inevitable because the very process of production creates the conditions to enlighten the proletariat to his enslavement and achieve solidarity beyond nationalism.<sup>92</sup> Once enlightened, they will not revert to their previous station. It is notable that for Marx, the revolution must come from the middle class, not the peasantry. He did not consider peasants to possess enough social awareness to power the revolution. Mao Tse-tung had different ideas about peasants.

### Maoist Revolutionary Theory

Because Mao Tse-tung grew from peasant stock and because the retarded industrialization of China prolonged semi-feudal system with a continued reliance on peasant labor, Maoist theory of revolution is based in the peasantry.<sup>93</sup> In this respect, it departs from Marxism to take on a principally rural and military perspective. The method of revolution in Maoism is protracted popular war. This war follows three distinct stages. In stage 1, the enemy (current government) is on the strategic offensive, the revolutionaries are on the strategic

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<sup>90</sup> Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism* (Dulles VA: Brassey's, Inc., 1990), 17.

<sup>91</sup> "Marxism: The Thought of Karl Marx," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, available from <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=114887&tocid=35147-35147.toc>, accessed 21 April 2001.

<sup>92</sup> Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 79.

defensive.<sup>94</sup> Insurgent warfare is exclusively isolated guerrilla attacks and the peasants provide the sanctuaries necessary for the guerrillas to survive. Stage 2, strategic stalemate, adds a component of mobile warfare, though the majority of combat is still guerrilla warfare. In the third stage, the insurgents launch a counter-offensive to recover lost territory utilizing mobile and positional warfare.<sup>95</sup> Mao acknowledges the war will be ruthless and destructive because of its protracted nature. The Cuban revolution seemed to demonstrate a potential shortcut to prolonged combat.

### Foco Revolutionary Theory

The Cuban revolution was a unique phenomenon with dramatic implications for a new twist on revolutionary theory. While it still relied on class struggle to provide the raw material for revolution, it diverged from standard Marxism by accomplishing the revolution before the “proletariat” was enlightened enough to rise up of their own accord. The ramifications of the Cuban Revolution were articulated (and exported) by revolutionary icon, Ché Guevara.

*We consider that the Cuban Revolution contributed three fundamental lessons to the conduct of revolutionary movements in America. They are: (1) Popular forces can win a war against the army. (2) It is not necessary to wait until all the conditions for making revolution exist; the insurrection can create them. (3) In underdeveloped America the countryside is the basic area for armed fighting.*<sup>96</sup>

This program for revolution is called *foco* (Spanish: *focus*) revolution. According to Guevara’s construct, through military action alone, a small, but dedicated band of guerrillas can provide the *focus* for revolution by achieving limited, but decisive military victories over government forces.<sup>97</sup> These victories draw some support when the peasants see the possibility of rebellion. Eventually guerrilla activity elicits an overreaction from government forces against the

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<sup>93</sup> Marxism: Variants of Marxism,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, available from <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=114887&tocid=35158-35158.toc>, accessed 21 April 2001.

<sup>94</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 212.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>96</sup> O’Neill, 42.

<sup>97</sup> Ian F.W. Beckett, *Encyclopedia of Guerrilla Warfare* (Santa Barbara CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1999), 70.

population as a whole, thereby providing the catalyst for a wider insurrection.<sup>98</sup> The foco method propagated through Latin America, probably for several reasons. It *seemed* to provide a reliable shortcut to revolution (it worked in Cuba). It was appealing because it was more regionally familiar than movements in Russia or China. Finally, the rural, underdeveloped conditions in Latin America more closely resembled the state of Cuban development than that of Russia. This theory is particularly relevant for Colombia.

### Limitations of Theory

While theory is useful to facilitate understanding of the generalities and progression of insurgency there are limits to its usefulness. Theories (at least good ones) tend to be well defined and structured. Actual insurgency, on the other hand, must react to real events that may or may not conform to the assumptions in the theory. Furthermore, theories usually attempt to define in simple discrete terms the motives and goals of the participants. In reality insurgency is a distinctly human affair and people rarely act according to neat unitary motivations and are not restricted by the sterile boundaries of theoretical constructs. In fact, people frequently hold contradictory notions in their head at the same time, and consequently appear to act irrationally. Additionally, they may quite rationally combine elements of different theories to adapt to their peculiar circumstances. Consequently simplistic analysis of a revolutionary group can lead to errant assumptions about what a revolutionary entity will or will not do.

### The Alternative: What are Insurgencies Distinguished From?

For the question, “Is the FARC still a revolutionary insurgency,” to be meaningful, there must be some alternative to accommodate a negative answer. If they are not an insurgency, what are they? There are two pertinent alternatives: cartel or terrorist group.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

## Drug Cartels

The basic definition of cartel provided earlier was “a combination of independent businesses formed to regulate production, pricing, and marketing of goods by the members.” Note that this definition does not stipulate the legality of the goods. It is also not exclusive of other activities or motivations in its members. In fact, there seems to be nothing in this definition which would prohibit an insurgent organization from also performing the actions of a cartel. Therefore, in order to make a useful distinction between an insurgency and a cartel, a stipulation must be added. For the purposes of this paper, a cartel (as distinct from an insurgency) is interested only in profit. It has no ambitious goals of usurping ultimate state authority or performing the functions of government. It is content to live in peaceful coexistence with the government and opposes it with force, only when necessary to protect the status quo in which it is growing wealthy. This was the character of the Medellín and Cali cartels described earlier. To illustrate just this point, Robert Bryden, head of the Drug Enforcement Agency’s New York City office remarked, “the Cali Cartel will kill you if they have to, but they would rather use a lawyer.”<sup>99</sup> They were in business for the business and any unnecessary conflict with the government simply detracted from the bottom line.

## Terrorist Groups

The term *terrorist group* poses a dilemma similar to *cartel*. Terrorism has been defined as a “form of warfare in which violence is directed primarily against noncombatants, rather than operational military and police forces...to alter the behavior and attitudes of specific groups....”<sup>100</sup> Certainly, insurgent groups utilize terrorism to further their aims. They may use it as a form of population control, to discourage opposition from rivals or to intimidate government officials into supporting policies beneficial to the guerrillas. In other words, all insurgents are likely terrorists in some form or another.

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<sup>99</sup> Chepesiuk, 16.

<sup>100</sup> O’Neill, 24.

The converse, however, is not always true—all terrorists are not insurgents. For example, it seems extremely unlikely that exiled Saudi Arabian terrorist Osama bin Laden has the intention of overthrowing the government of the United States. His aims are probably more limited, for instance, coercing the US to reduce their presence in the Middle East by influencing American public opinion. Additionally, terrorism is a form of warfare *intentionally* distinct from armed conflict. It is an alternate means of gaining political or social concessions. In summary, terrorist groups are those organizations that use terrorism exclusively (avoiding armed conflict) for the limited aim of modifying the behavior of or extracting concessions from a target group.

### **The Criteria**

The ultimate purpose of the preceding discussion is to arrive at criteria for assessing the character of the FARC to determine whether or not they are a revolutionary insurgency. The definitions will form the basis of the criteria. In order to qualify, the FARC must engage in **subversion** and **armed conflict** for the **purpose of overthrowing the existing government**. Subversion and armed conflict are easily identifiable criteria associated with observable actions. Characterizing the purpose behind these actions is a much more difficult task. Of course, there can be no definitive answers when dealing in the realm of human motivation, however a truly held revolutionary intent can be inferred from indirect indicators. Consistent adherence in published documents, official statements and internal communications to an ideology that advocates revolution indicates a revolutionary purpose. This indication is strengthened if the FARC are progressing with respect to a long term plan. Large-scale, coordinated military actions are inconsistent with alternative classifications and will help rule out the possibility of the FARC as a cartel or terrorist group. Finally, the primary objection to categorizing the FARC as revolutionarily insurgent—corruption of ideology by the drug economy—can be answered if the FARC ideology can be shown to incorporate illicit drug trade while maintaining its goal of revolution.

## Analysis: Is the FARC and Insurgent Group?

*The revolutionary spirit is mighty convenient in this, that it frees one from all scruples as regards ideas.*

Joseph Conrad  
*A Personal Record*, 1912<sup>101</sup>

With the importance of Colombia to US national interests established, the historical foundation laid and the criteria for insurgency discussed at length, the final step is to apply the criteria. Is the FARC engaged in subversion and armed conflict for the purpose of overthrowing the government?

### Subversion

Joint Publication 1-02 defines subversion as “action designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a regime.”<sup>102</sup> This meaning describes broad effects that could include a variety of different actions. Since the definition of insurgency distinguishes between subversion and armed conflict, this analysis will treat them separately. However, it is instructive to remember their effects are complementary. Undermining the military strength of a regime will obviously have an impact on subsequent armed conflict. Undermining economic, psychological or political strength will also alter the military equation, though not directly (e.g. making the regime less willing to resort to military force, despite a superior military capability). Similarly, armed conflict would both indirectly and directly serve the goal of subversion. However, in the interest of organizing the analysis, the two will be addressed separately.

The FARC routinely engages in a number of subversive activities. One of the most internationally sensitive is kidnapping. Kidnapping undermines the psychological and political strength of a regime by presenting a situation where the kidnappers hold power (regardless of

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<sup>101</sup> Michael C. Thomsett and Jean Freestone Thomsett, *War and Conflict Quotations* (London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1997), 123.

<sup>102</sup> *Joint Publication 102, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, (Washington DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1994), 443.



how short the interval) over the government. Widespread kidnapping paints the picture of a regime unable to sustain the rule of law or mechanisms for justice inside its own borders. To the extent that kidnapping discourages investment and development by the international business and political community, the economic power of the regime is also reduced.

The FARC is widely known to have financed its operations partially through kidnapping for years.<sup>103</sup> A recent example demonstrates this form of subversion continues. On June 26, 2000, FARC operatives kidnapped Monica Negret and her five-year old son. Negret was freed July 25<sup>th</sup> after her husband paid an unspecified sum. The boy was held for two million dollars ransom until rescued by Colombian commandos in October.<sup>104</sup> Colombia has even been called “the kidnap capital of the world,” where “every three hours someone is abducted by guerrillas who demand ransoms worth £100 million a year to fund their war against the state.”<sup>105</sup>

Some of the money obtained through kidnapping undoubtedly funds another form of subversion. Bribery has led to rampant corruption throughout the country of Colombia. This cancer has spread from highest levels of national government all the way to the local levels. The president prior to Pastrana, Ernesto Samper, was implicated for having accepted drug money for his campaign.<sup>106</sup> The executive branch is not alone; dozens of congressmen are equally guilty while countless judges have been bribed to free convicted traffickers.<sup>107</sup> According to James Zackrison, US Navy intelligence analyst and fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, “The insurgents are weakening the government's resolve through the traditional channels of personal corruption so inherent in Colombia's political system.”<sup>108</sup>

Not only does it weaken resolve, corruption damages the state's political power by reducing its standing in the international community. US decertification following the Samper

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<sup>103</sup> Zackrison and Bradley.

<sup>104</sup> Margarita Martinez, “American Boy Freed In Colombia, Kidnappers Arrested,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 12 October 2000.

<sup>105</sup> “A Country Held To Ransom,” *London Daily Telegraph*, 1 March 2001.

<sup>106</sup> Marcella and Schulz, 18.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

scandal placed Colombia in the company of pariah states like North Korea and Libya. The loss of US funding obviously had an economic impact, as well. The FARC capitalizes on these shortcomings whenever possible through international communiqués, the Internet and through its own formalized relations with other countries. For instance, recently a current FARC member and daughter of founding member Jacobo Arenas addressed the Venezuelan parliamentary assembly, openly denouncing the Colombian government.<sup>109</sup> Clearly, the FARC is well-versed in subversion. This weakening of the regime helps set the conditions for armed combat against the state.

### **Armed Conflict**

The FARC has been in open, armed conflict with the government of Colombia for more than 30 years. By its own admission, it is engaged in “an armed revolution to fight for the power.”<sup>110</sup> The history of combat between the FARC and the government over the last several decades is not in dispute. Although only a small percentage of the engagements break the international news, the headlines are still littered with Colombian conflict at least weekly. Despite the ongoing peace process, the guerrillas continue to fight. In fact, all indications point to an escalation of combat.

Abundant funds supplied by the drug economy give the guerrillas the resources to purchase modern weapons—they are frequently better outfitted than the government forces (military and police) they oppose. In the fall of 2000, Colombian authorities reported a 50 percent rise in illicit arms and munitions smuggling (including rifles, land mines, explosives,

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<sup>108</sup> Zackrisson and Bradley.

<sup>109</sup> Alberto Mejia, Colombian Army Lieutenant Colonel, interview by author, 18 April 2001, Leavenworth, Kansas. Lt Col Mejia was the top graduate in his class at Colombian officer basic, advanced and staff courses. He has commanded a battalion in the field operating directly against the FARC and has extensive experience in counter-narcotic and counter-insurgent missions. Colombia recalled its ambassador to Venezuela in protest of the address by Arenas.

<sup>110</sup> Center for International Policy, *Peace on the Table*, available from <http://www.ciponline.org/comombia/pot-farc.htm> accessed 22 April 2001. This document summarizes demands and proposals for peace presented by the FARC in various communiqués and official statements.

ammunition and rocket-grenade launchers) into Colombia from all five of its neighbors.<sup>111</sup> Last year authorities seized enough rifles, machine guns and mortars to provide two weapons for nearly every guerrilla in the country.<sup>112</sup> Unfortunately, bankrupt former Soviet republics, China, Iran and a number of other countries ensure there are weapons for sale. The FARC is not shy about the fact that it is shopping for more sophisticated hardware, including surface-to-air missiles.<sup>113</sup>

The FARC fronts are putting this hardware to good use. With the greatest personnel strength in its history—common estimates of 17,000 fighters—the insurgents have moved from small unit harassment and terrorism to mobile warfare with large units.<sup>114</sup> On 30 August 1996, FARC forces numbering 400 combatants attacked a Colombian Army company-sized outpost located at Las Delicias in the Putumayo department of southern Colombia. With unprecedented intensity and sophistication, the guerrillas overran the 120-man garrison and took half its troops prisoner.<sup>115</sup> This was no target of opportunity either. The insurgents had constructed a mock-up of the garrison, run rehearsals, infiltrated guerrillas among the soldiers and used mortars and explosives to breach the compound.

Similarly, in February of 1998, the 154-man 52<sup>nd</sup> Counter-guerrilla Battalion followed an informant to the site of a FARC base camp.<sup>116</sup> What was to be a Colombian army raid, was

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<sup>111</sup> Tod Robberson, "Colombia's Neighbors Wait in Fear," *Dallas Morning News*, 28 September 2000.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Tod Robberson, "Colombian Rebels Grow In Defiance," *Dallas Morning News*, 30 August 2000.

<sup>114</sup> Adam Isacson, "The Colombian Dilemma," *Center for International Policy, International Policy Report*, available from <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/coipr/coipr001.htm> accessed 22 April 2001.

<sup>115</sup> Franco, 83.

<sup>116</sup> Tom Marks, Colombia In The Ring Part 1: Bogotá Wages Counterinsurgency On Several Fronts," *Soldier of Fortune*, August 2000, 51. For those readers skeptical of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine it may be helpful to know Dr Marks is a West Point graduate, professor at the Academy of the Pacific and was recently a featured panelist in a workshop conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies of the CNA Corporation—a federally funded research and development center based in Washington, DC—and the Institute for National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University. This forum, which included Colombian Army representatives, National War College faculty, Ambassador Passage and other distinguished participants was aimed at examining US policy toward Colombia. The results were compiled

quickly revealed to be a sophisticated zone ambush. Three days of fighting resulted in 80 dead and 43 captured soldiers.<sup>117</sup> This was just a hint of things to come. In August 1998, the FARC contributed their part to the ongoing presidential campaign by launching a nationwide series of attacks. In one engagement, an estimated 1,200 guerrillas attacked an army company collocated with a counter-narcotics police base at Miraflores, Guaviare. Once again, the government forces suffered heavy losses: 30 killed, 50 wounded and 100 captured.<sup>118</sup> July 1999 witnessed another massive offensive, this time launched from the demilitarized zone the FARC had been ceded by the Pastrana administration. This series of attacks saw the debut of the FARC's homemade but nonetheless formidable armored vehicles.<sup>119</sup> Not only are these attacks ample evidence the FARC is still conducting armed conflict against the government, the scale and character of the operations indicates they have something in mind beyond just holding the government at bay.

### **Intent to Overthrow**

Divining the intent of an individual or group of individuals can be a difficult task. Certainly, there is little room for dogmatism. Still, there seems to be ample evidence the ultimate goal of the FARC is still to supplant the elected government with its own revolutionary ruling system. This conclusion is supported by a number of indicators: official statements, a long term plan with progress toward the stated goal, large-scale maneuvers inconsistent with alternative explanations (terrorist group or drug cartel) and an ideology that incorporates the criticism of corruption by the drug trade. The following paragraphs examine each of these indicators.

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by David Spencer and Heather Noss, and titled: *Colombia: Strategic End State, Goals, and Means...A Workshop Report*. See the full citation in the Bibliography.

<sup>117</sup> Franco, 88.

<sup>118</sup> Marks, 51.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. These armored vehicles were essentially tracked heavy equipment (bulldozers, front-end loaders) with additional steel plating welded to protect the driver and engine. Wray Johnson, US Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, Ph.D., interview by author, 28 March 2001, Maxwell AFB AL. Lt Col Johnson is an instructor at the US Air Force School of Advanced Airpower Studies. Due to his extensive experience with counter-insurgency he was recently hired as an instructor at the US Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting.

## Official Statements

Since its inception in 1966, the FARC has consistently maintained its goal of revolution. This is still clear in its official statements. The official FARC Internet web page contains very clear declarations of revolutionary intent.

*“The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - The People's Army, as the most elevated expression of revolutionary struggle for national liberation, are a military - political movement which develops its action in the ideological, political, organizational, propagandistic and in battalions of guerilla fighters. These conform the tactic of combining all these forms of struggle of the masses to gain power for the people.”<sup>120</sup>*

In this same document, the FARC goes to great lengths to demonstrate how its members conform to all the requirements of the Geneva Convention for combatants in a civil war. This thread of revolutionary objectives runs through all the FARC's official correspondence. Even in its “Proposals for the Negotiated Political Settlement of the Internal Armed Conflict,” they proclaim, “...we were forced to follow the other path: an armed revolution to fight for the power.”<sup>121</sup> Even within the context of the current peace process they are attempting to negotiate (or sabotage negotiation) with a series of demands that add up to a revolution by political means. Taken as a whole, the requirements listed in FARC documents as prerequisites to any ceasefire equate to replacing the current government with a FARC government, along with all the trappings of imposed socialism.<sup>122</sup>

Statements of revolutionary purpose are not limited to dialogue with the government of Colombia. FARC communicates the same message to the people of Colombia, especially those that reside in FARC-controlled areas. The guerrilla organization outlines standards of behavior for indigenous people that prohibit them from even interacting with government forces, police or

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<sup>120</sup> FARC-EP official internet web site, “Belligerence,” *Documents*, available from <http://www.farc-ep.org/>, accessed 19 April 2001.

<sup>121</sup> Center for International Policy, *Peace on the Table*.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. The standard socialist provisions are included: state control of the majority of industry, massive wealth redistribution and unprincipled land reform, instituted as a legislative Act enacted by the FARC-EP—the de facto government. They also take steps to neutralize opposition to their resource methods by declaring narcotics to be a serious social problem that must not be dealt with through military methods and vehemently opposing extradition. Other documents on the site reveal the true intent by calling

military. It enforces these standards through violence and terror. To strengthen their international standing and subvert the government, the insurgents also correspond with foreign governments clearly supporting their ultimate objective. Recently, the FARC secretariat forwarded a letter to the Parliament of Canada outlining their cause and grievances with the government of Colombia in advance of a summit of Western Hemisphere national leaders.<sup>123</sup> An honest objective review of the FARC's official statements reveal they unequivocally advocate the overthrow of the existing, freely elected government, to be replaced by a FARC-run, revolutionary government instituting radical communist "reforms." The argument that all these statements indicate the truly held objective of the organization (vice some form of propaganda or deception) is strengthened by their adherence to a long-term plan.

### Long-term plan

On one level the FARC has published their long-term plan. It is a program of government reform that will be sequentially implemented and formed the basis for its proposals and demands in the current round of peace negotiation. That is the political long-term plan. The military plan that will set the conditions for the ultimate revolution described in those demands is not so readily distributed to the world. Recalling the revolutionary theory reviewed earlier, one might expect them to adopt a standard Marxist progression of enlightened proletarians rising up to remove the shackles of the bourgeoisie. The only problem is the lack of middle class participation in or support to their cause. The FARC has been a peasant movement for half a century. The Maoist strategy of a protracted popular war does not fit either as it is predicated on a broad base of support throughout the population and a long-term transformation of society from the inside. In fact, it makes the most sense that the FARC, whose natal experience so closely mirrored that of Fidel Castro, would adopt the foco framework that was propagated through Latin

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for the legalization of drug consumption as the only alternative for the elimination of the problems associated with the illicit drug traffic.

America by Ché Guevarra. Under this construct, a small, dedicated band of rebels works to achieve enough success against the state military to inspire revolution in the people. Regrettably, Ché failed to inform his readers of the requirement in foco revolution to select an incompetent government and military to revolt against.

Given this hodge-podge of related strategies, it appears the FARC has devised a modified foco-Maoist approach.<sup>124</sup> Captured FARC documents indicate a four-phase progression:

***Phase 1:** Build up of strength with a goal of 60 fronts for a total of 36,000 troops with 18,000 armed*

***Phase 2:** Goal of 80 fronts with 36,000 armed troops*

***Phase 3:** The first general offensive will be launched, with 18,000 guerrillas operating in the front areas and 18,000 guerrillas grouped in companies and mobile columns in the Eastern mountain chain*

***Phase 4:** Complete the installation of a provisional government and socio-political organization<sup>125</sup>*

This strategy reflects a foco orientation by its reliance on the military, with the societal conformation enforced once the revolutionary army seizes power. It is Maoist in its progression of tactics. While not matching up by the numbers, phases 1 and 2 equate to Mao's stage 1. The fronts were conducting almost exclusively guerrilla operations while building strength and acquiring weapons. Phase 3 is the period of mobile operations that corresponds to Mao's stage 2. Although comprising only 67 fronts with 17,000 armed fighters, Dr Tom Marks states unequivocally the FARC entered Mao's second stage of mobile warfare in mid-1996.<sup>126</sup> This corresponds in time to the major operations described previously.

## Large-scale Maneuvers

The FARC's recently adopted mobile, large-unit operations indicate a revolutionary intent in another way, as well. Had the insurgents truly morphed into a profit-motivated cartel,

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<sup>123</sup> News Agency New Colombia, Communiqué to members of Canadian parliament from the FARC, available from <http://home3.swipnet.se/anncol/eng-com/981211-letter-parlament.html>, accessed 22 April 2001.

<sup>124</sup> The FARC may be foco-Maoist in strategy, however they remain orthodox Marxist in their program for the revolutionary society.

<sup>125</sup> Zackrison and Bradley.

<sup>126</sup> Tom Marks, "US Forces In Colombia Involved In More Than The War On Drugs," *Army Times*, 22 January 2001.

they would have no need of maneuvers on this scale. It is prohibitively expensive to field an army capable of brigade or division sized coordinated operations if their *only* motive is profit. The cartels of the 1980s made billions of dollars relying on intimidation and corruption alone. Reports indicate virtually all of the FARC's annual tens of millions of dollars get plowed back into their war effort.<sup>127</sup>

Moreover, this surge of offensive operations against the Colombian military and police forces appears to be the beginning of a prolonged campaign to drive out government presence from as much area as they can. By shifting the perceived (and real) balance of power vis-à-vis the government in their favor, the FARC contribute to the *foco* goal of generating popular support in response to military victory. All of these effects are purchased at a premium through the acquisition of expensive weapons and the funding of up to a 100,000-person civilian support militia.<sup>128</sup> While the cartel alternative to insurgency is inconsistent with FARC actions, the terrorist alternative is excluded by definition. Terror is a surrogate for military power to be used to coerce through the targeting of non-combatants, but the FARC is using military power to attack combatants. All indications point toward a revolutionary motive

## Ideology

The final piece of the argument is the ideology. If the FARC have not abandoned their revolutionary objective, yet are benefiting enormously from the drug trade, their ideology must be able to accommodate both. According to Lt Col Mejia, they have folded the two together quite successfully. The FARC have devised a three-part ideological construct with a political, military and economic component.<sup>129</sup> The political component interfaces with external agencies and conducts the indoctrination training that all guerrillas receive daily. The military component is responsible for not only operations against government forces, but also the enforcement activities

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<sup>127</sup> Isacson.

<sup>128</sup> "Colombia: Adopting A Tougher Stance Against The FARC," *Stratfor.com*, 25 January 2001.



that support the economic component. The economic component generates the required financial resources through kidnapping, extortion and (primarily) drugs. Internal documents and indoctrination scripts avoid the mention of drug trafficking, referring instead to the economic plan or peace taxes. While incongruent and misleading, this sort of euphemism is perfectly consistent with standard communist propagandistic style.

In summary, the analysis reveals the FARC to be a revolutionary insurgency. Their acts of subversion are widely known and reported. They have engaged in armed conflict since their founding, with increasingly large and sophisticated maneuvers. These insurgents have made statements and prosecuted actions that clearly indicate a revolutionary intent. They adhere to a long-term plan for overthrow, conduct large-scale maneuvers inconsistent with an overriding profit motive and follow and inculcate members with a comprehensive ideology that incorporates drug money as the economic plan.

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<sup>129</sup> Mejia. Lt Col Mejia's extensive field experience included contact with civilians in FARC operating areas, as well as, captured FARC prisoners. The construct of the FARC ideology was drawn from the author's interview with him.

## Conclusions

*Never ascribe to your opponent motives meaner than your own.*

J.M. Barrie  
In a speech delivered 3 May 1922<sup>130</sup>

Though historically ignored in middle-class America, as well as inside the Washington beltway, Colombia is now making headlines daily. In the scramble to beat a deadline with an eye-grabbing headline the ground truth of the Andean dilemma often becomes the collateral victim of news making. Politicians and officials are frequently no better than the media, supporting proposals based on simplistic analyses and the familiar American tendency to paint everything in cowboy and Indian motif—a classic case of mirroring. Unfortunately, the political fiction that keeps constituencies comfortable may lead to the ruin or at least decline, of an important Western Hemisphere country.

The fact is Colombia matters, beyond the mere curiosity of the headlines. It is a partner democracy—the second oldest in the hemisphere. As such, it has been a stabilizing influence on a historically tempestuous region. Colombia has consistently boasted one of the strongest economies in South America yielding \$11 billion in two-way trade in 2000 and hosting hundreds of major American corporations with tens of thousands of American workers. Perhaps most significantly, Colombia teams with two of its neighbors to supply 20 percent of US oil. Unfortunately, literally tons of cocaine and heroin pour into America every year from Colombia. Unquestionably, this represents an important national security interest; there is a strong argument it is even vitally related to national security.

This important country is struggling with the effects of a 35-year-old insurgency that is gaining momentum, aided by profits from promiscuous drug trade. Pundits, policy wonks and elected officials have taken turns dismissing the FARC as merely a cartel and decrying the Colombian quagmire as another Vietnam. What is the truth? It matters because the methods

appropriate to attack and defeat a profit-motivated illegal business are different from those required to quell an insurgency bent on overthrow of the elected government.

Divining the true character of the FARC must begin with a historical framework for understanding. Colombia has struggled with political violence since it broke from Spanish rule in 1810. 20th century industrialization intensified the conflict between the haves and have-nots, culminating in La Violencia with its 200,000 deaths over 15 years. The ensuing governmental system gave rise to a number of guerrilla organizations seeking social justice through socialist revolution. These organizations struggled to survive in a democracy, making little headway until the windfall of illicit drug profit freed them from the poverty of their peasant supported existence.

The corruption of drugs and money surfaced the question, “are they still a revolutionary insurgency?” which first begs the question, “what exactly is an insurgency?” Synthesizing the joint military definition with associated concepts resulted in a definition: an organization engaged in subversion and armed conflict for the purpose of overthrowing the government? The elements of the definition serve as criteria for answering the basic research question.

FARC subversion ranges from kidnapping to corruption, weakening the economic, psychological and political strength of the regime. A quick glance at the headlines any day of the week yields ample proof the FARC is engaged in armed conflict. The revolutionary intent is more difficult to prove, but there are abundant indicators. FARC official statements have been consistent for three decades calling for the replacement of the elected government with a revolutionary government run by the FARC and the implementation of radical socialist “reforms.” FARC adherence to a long-term military strategy for achieving this revolution strengthens the claim that the official statements are more than just propaganda. Additionally, large, well-equipped units conducting large-scale offensive maneuver against government forces indicates a desire to do more than just facilitate the family business. This is backed up by a

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<sup>130</sup> Thomsett and Thomsett, 39.

comprehensive ideology that integrates the military action and drug profits as the economic plan for implementing the desired political agenda. In the mind of the guerrilla, there is no conflict.

In the final accounting, the FARC is conducting revolutionary insurgent warfare. Policy makers would do well to remember this when formulating US posture and actions toward the government of Colombia.

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